
RSS: A Quick Start Guide for Educators

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Introduction*

So just what is RSS and how can it be used in education? Depending on who you talk to, RSS stands for Rich Site Summary or Real Simple Syndication. Either way, RSS is a real important technology that information specialists and educators would be well advised to harness sooner rather than later.

In simple terms, Weblogs (and an ever-growing number of other sites) generate a behind-the-scenes code in a language similar to HTML called XML. This code, usually referred to as a "feed" (as in "news feed"), makes it possible for readers to "subscribe" to the content that is created on a particular Weblog so they no longer have to visit the blog itself to get it. As is true with traditional syndication, the content comes to you instead of you going to get it, hence "Real Simple Syndication."

For instance, say you've found 20 or 30 (or, like me, 120) Weblog sites on the Internet that interest you. Finding the time to click through to those sites and keep abreast of any new information on a regular basis would be nearly impossible. But what if you only had to go to one place to read all of the new content on all of those sites? Wouldn't be so difficult, would it? Well, that's exactly what RSS allows you to do by using what's called an "aggregator" or

news-feed collector. The aggregator checks the sites you subscribe to, usually every hour, and it collects all the new content into a folder that is just waiting for you to come and read it. Big deal, you say? Very big, indeed, for a variety of reasons.

Take this general scenario, for instance: You currently get the headlines from The New York Times via an e-mail message that arrives each morning. But more and more, your e-mail box is being clogged up by spammers selling everything from pornography to mortgages. There are new virus warnings every day. That New York Times content is getting lost in the morass that e-mail has become. Not so with RSS. The feed your aggregator checks is virus free, and you know that everything in your aggregator is something you want to read because you subscribed to it. No ads, no spam, just new content from the sources you read. You can scan the headlines, read the entire post, click through to the actual Web site, and file the information away for later retrieval.

Setting Up an RSS Feed Reader

Ready to start? First, you need to set up a newsreader (feedreader, aggregator) to collect your RSS feeds. I would suggest the Web-based service from Bloglines.com. Why? While there are a number of great downloadable newsreader packages out there that can do wonderful things, the main advantage to Bloglines is that you can access it from anywhere you have an Internet connection. In other words, you don't have to be on your own computer(s) with special software installed to read your news. (Of course, if you do only use one machine, there are many aggregators with more features than Bloglines that you may want to consider.)

Registering for a Bloglines account is easy. When you get to the site, click on "Register" in the upper right hand corner of the homepage and follow the procedures. You'll get a confirmation e-mail to which you'll need to respond, and then you should be ready to go.


Bloglines has a few ways to subscribe to feeds. First, you can look at their listing of most popular subscriptions by clicking on the "Top Blogs" link at the upper right hand side of the Bloglines homepage. It will take you to a page of the 100 most subscribed to feeds among their users. You can preview the content, and then you can subscribe to any on that list by just checking the box and then clicking on the "Subscribe" button at the very bottom of the page. Then, when you're logged in to Bloglines and you click on the "My Blogs" link, you'll see the feeds you subscribed to with the number of messages waiting to

be read in parenthesis next to the name. Any time you come back, the feed name will be bold when new messages are waiting.

The other way to subscribe to feeds is to manually add them to your list by using the “Subscribe by Entering URL” input form the bottom of your subscription list. To use this, you’ll need to paste in the address of the feed you want. (More about finding feeds in a second.) Once you paste in a feed, Bloglines will ask you if you want to make a folder and whether or not you want other people to see your feed. (You have the option of letting others view your subscriptions. My public feeds are at <http://bloglines.com/public/wrichard>.) And, when you have some feeds to work with, Bloglines lets you rename them (among other things) by clicking on the “Manage my Feeds” link just above the subscription box. It’s pretty intuitive, and if you start getting quite a few feeds in your list, you might want to take the time to get organized.

Finally, throw a link to Bloglines on your toolbar or in your Favorites folder. Better yet, add the Bloglines notifier (<http://www.bloglines.com/about/notifier>) to the bottom of your screen which will let you know when new content has been posted to any of the feeds you are subscribed to. Either way, remember to check back often. Collecting feeds only works if you read the new stuff regularly! (For even more info, read the Bloglines FAQ at <http://www.bloglines.com/help/faq#updates> .)

Finding and Adding Feeds

Once you have your aggregator set up, it’s time to find some relevant feeds to stock it with. Luckily, more and more news outlets and standard Websites are adding feeds for their content (for instance the New York Times at <http://www.nytimes.com/services/xml/rss/>) so there will be more and more to choose from in the future. But for now let’s just deal with blogs. First, understand that most Weblogs have a link to their feeds on their homepages. On many, it’s a text link in one of the side columns that says “Syndicate this site (XML).” Or it might be a link that says “RSS 1.0 (or 2.0).” But most often, it’s a pretty orange icon that looks like this:  No matter which type it is, you’ll need to click on it in order to get the address of that site’s feed. Don’t worry if the page that comes up is a scary looking mass of code that you can’t make heads or tails of. All you really need is the Internet address of that page (the URL.) Just copy the address, go into Bloglines, paste it into your subscribe line at the bottom of the left hand window on the “My Blogs” page, and subscribe. Next time you visit your “My Blogs” page, the feed for that site should show up.

If you're not sure what Weblogs to subscribe to, you can always use one of the blog search engines to find sites that might be relevant to your interests. Some of the better Weblog search sites include Technorati.com, Feedster.com, and Daypop.com, but there are many more listed at Weblogs Compendium at this page: <http://www.lights.com/weblogs/searching.html>. And once you find a few, Bloglines will also recommend some other feeds that you might be interested in based on what you're already reading. (Isn't that nice of them?) Just click on "My Recommendations" in the section below where all of your subscriptions show up in the left hand pane.

Using RSS Feeds in the Classroom

So, you've got your favorite Weblog feeds in your aggregator, and you're starting to get the hang of this "getting the good stuff when I want it" concept. How can you start using this in your school and in your classroom? Well, there are a number of different ways that RSS feeds can add to your knowledge base, help you communicate, and make your teaching better.

- **RSS Feeds with Student Weblogs**

If you already use Weblogs with your students, the uses of RSS should be pretty apparent. Instead of checking out all 25 (or 30, or more) student Weblogs every day, you could just collect their work in your aggregator using their RSS feeds. That way, you can scan through all of the class content in one place, make sure it's all appropriate, and click through to a particular post if you want to comment on it. My use of student feeds in this way has drastically reduced my reading time and allowed me to make all of my classes paperless. In addition, you can provide individual student Weblog feeds to parents or counselors or whoever else might be interested in that student's work and be savvy enough to know about RSS. (Don't worry, pretty soon most people will know.)

With some Weblog packages, you can even subscribe to feeds that show new comments on the various sites, or even to just certain topics. In other words, you can track just about everything going on in your student blogs using RSS.

In addition, Weblog software like Moveable Type and Manila allow you to import RSS feeds into pages you create for your or your students' sites. While it takes a little bit of code to make it work, the benefits of bringing topic specific

feeds right into student (or teacher) work spaces is something that you might want to explore.

- **RSS Feeds without Student Weblogs**

Even if your students don't have Weblogs, you may want to have them set up their own Bloglines account. With more and more news sources producing feeds for aggregation, the breadth of current events and even topic-specific research that students could collect could go a long way to assisting them with research or further study. (It's one reason why I think RSS could be a great help for the lack of media and information literacy skills students have.) And, if you use a Weblog, they can include your feed in their aggregator to stay abreast of what is going on.

- **RSS Search Feeds**

The idea of aggregating research feeds is especially interesting. Say you have a student that is doing a project or a paper on global warming. That student could actually create an RSS feed that would bring any news about global warming to his aggregator as soon as it was published. And you can create a feed about any topic you want. Here's how:

RSS Feeds for News Searches

If you want to create a feed for what's in the daily news about a particular topic, you can make a syndicated feed of search results of Google News. Just take the following feed address and add your search terms where indicated. <http://voidstar.com/gnews2rss.php?num=50&q=your+terms+here> So, for instance, if you want to have a feed for the search term "journalism and weblog" it would look like <http://voidstar.com/gnews2rss.php?num=50&q=journalism+and+weblog> Copy that address and paste it into your Bloglines aggregator, and you'll start getting any news that's in the media about your topic right away. When you start getting results from your feed, you may want to refine your search until you get a manageable number of posts. And remember, you can create as many of these feeds as you like, with as many terms as you like (as long as they are separated by a plus sign.) (Thanks to the folks at voidstar.com for providing this service.)

Another way to get continually updated news about various topics is to use the feeds provided by Moreover.com. It provides a huge list of predefined topic searches at http://w.moreover.com/categories/category_list_rss.html. You can find even more of these types of Moreover feeds (including ones for your favorite sports teams, the state you live in, and your favorite presidential candidate) at this page on the Syndic8.com site: <http://www.syndic8.com/feedcat.php?Scheme=Syndic8>.

RSS Feeds for Weblog Searches

Getting a regular feed of searches in the blogosphere is just as easy, but you need to remember that the results aren't always going to be as, shall we say, appropriate. Obviously, the vast majority of Weblogs are not edited for content by someone other than the author, and invariably there will be some questionable posts that will land in your aggregator. Still, Weblogs offer up some really great potential research, and you might want to experiment with searching them on your own before bringing students into the fray. To do so, the easiest way is to go to Feedster.com and type in your search terms. On the page of results, you'll see a little 2.0 RSS box that when you click on it will give you a number of standard newsreaders to choose from. If you're logged in at Bloglines, just click the Bloglines link and it will automatically add it to your account. Otherwise, click on the 2.0 RSS box and grab the URL from the next page. You can go through the same process at Blogdigger.com, Syndic8.com and other Weblog search sites.

RSS Feeds for Website Searches

There's more. You can even create an RSS feed from a search of Google sites (not news, sites.) So, if there is new content about global warming added to a site that's already on the Internet, or if there is a whole new site created about the topic, you'll find out about it in your aggregator. Here's how. Go to Googlealerts.com and sign up for an account. It's free. Once your registered, you can create up to five searches that can bring back up to 150 results total. Just fill in the form with the search terms you want, click "Run Searches Automatically," and click "Update." Then, click the link in the left hand column where it says "Feed Settings." All of your searches will come up, and you can check the box that says "RSS Feed" next to each one of them, then click "Update" at the bottom. Then, take the feed address that appears in each box and copy it into your Bloglines account. (No page that comes up with that scary looking mass of code that you can't make heads or tails of this time.)

RSS Feeds for News Group Searches

You can also search Internet news groups and get an RSS feed of the results. (Where does it end?) To do this, go to Pubsub.com. (The specific address is <http://www.pubsub.com/nntp/>.) Put in your search terms, enter your e-mail address, and Pubsub will send you a confirmation e-mail with a link to your subscription. When you click on the link, you can either copy the RSS feed address, or you can click the cut little “Quick Sub” link that will allow you to file it right into Bloglines (provided you’re already logged into Bloglines, of course.) Pretty cool. But beware that a search feed of newsgroups can bring back all sorts of irrelevant content and you may want to spend some time refining your search to match your interests.

- **RSS Feeds for Other News Outlets**

Now as I said, a number of more traditional news outlets are starting to provide RSS feeds of their content including the New York Times, Washington Post, Boston Globe, Christian Science Monitor, US World and News Report, Rolling Stone and many others. Many of these can be found at the Weblogs Compendium site at this address: <http://www.lights.com/weblogs/rssfeeds.html>. If you want to find out if your favorite publication has an RSS feed, do a Google search with the publication name and “RSS” and see what comes up.

- **RSS Feeds for Bookmarks**

One of the more recent uses of RSS has been to syndicate the Internet bookmarks you keep of your travels. You can do this using a site called Furl.net. With a Furl account (which is free) you can save, annotate, rate, organize and share the best links that you find on the Internet. And, even better, you can create RSS feeds for the unique departments that you store those links in. Let’s use our global warming example. Every time you come to a site that has information on global warming, you can “Furl it” and save it into your global warming folder. (Instructions on how to do this are on the Furl site...it’s easy!) Now, anyone who may be subscribed to the feed that Furl.net creates for that global warming folder will get automatically updated when you add a new link to it. Take it one step further. Say you set up a classroom Furl.net account, and you and all of your students added links to a variety of

topic specific folders as you found them. You could all keep track of those links by subscribing to the feeds that were most relevant in your Bloglines account. And Furl offers a whole bunch of other ways to share your bookmarks as well.

RSS Resources

There are a slew of great resources for learning about RSS, some of which are mentioned above. Here are a few others:

RSS Resource page from Lockergnome:
<http://channels.lockergnome.com/rss/>

For a great introduction to RSS, try Fagan Finder's "Explanation of RSS, How You Can Use it, and Finding RSS Feeds" at
<http://www.faganfinder.com/search/rss.shtml>

Jenny Levine gave a great presentation at the Computers in Libraries Conference, and it's online at
<http://www.sls.lib.il.us/infotech/presentations/2004/cil-rss.pdf>

"RSS: The Next Killer App For Education" by Mary Harrsch (<http://ts.mivu.org/default.asp?show=article&id=2010>) is an article that has more scenarios of how RSS might be used by teachers and students.

*Portions of the introduction excerpted from "Blogging and RSS – The 'What's It?' and 'How To' of Powerful New Web Tools for Educators" at
<http://www.infotoday.com/MMSchools/jan04/richardson.shtml>